

Fifteen Kennings For Woman: A Sequence

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Summary: Being a girl on Berk means many things, as Astrid discovers by living through them.

1. The Young Pine of Ribbons

Phlegma puts Astrid's hair in pigtails for the Midsummer Thing, tying them off with pretty red ribbons. Astrid preens until Snotlout rings her head like a bell and the twins make it the rope for tug of war. By the time she chases down skinny Hiccup to recover the ribbon he snitched, she's had it. She hides behind the sheep shed to unravel the braids and pull her hair into a ponytail, then spends the rest of the Thing biting any hand that touches her.

Which is why Berk's Midsummer peace thereafter names teeth among the weapons under its ban.

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><p>Author's Note: _A kenning is a Norse poetic trope, a circumlocutory compound that describes a person, place or thing. They can be straightforward (like "ring-giver" for "king") or complex, even riddling. All of these kennings for "woman" come from Old Norse poetry. "Young pine of ribbons" occurs in the life of St. Catherine, Kǣtrǣ-nardrǣpa, by Kǣlfr Hallsson. Women are frequently compared to trees in Norse and Icelandic poetry. A "Thing" is a regular assembly of free men at which laws were made and lawsuits settled; it also had religious, commercial and just plain celebratory aspects around the edges._

2. The Land of the Ocean's Fire

Singed and exhausted, Astrid ducks her head in the last bucket of water and scrubs her face clean. Snotlout blathers about the soot bringing out her eyes and Tuffnut adds yeah, like a polecat's and

his sister gives him a shiner to match. If only they'd all shut up: her ears are still ringing from the roar of the flames that devoured two longhouses.

She escapes to the headland above the harbor where a red dawn scatters its embers across the waves. Shutting her eyes, Astrid opens her mouth to the sea breeze to rinse the taste of smoke away.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _ "Ocean's fire" is a kenning for gold; the image of a woman bedecked in that metal is common in Old Norse poetry. (I've cheated a little here by alluding to sunrise over the water as another form of ocean's fire, as well as the effects of dragonfire on a coastal village. My artistic license is current.) "Land of ocean's fire" comes from an anonymous verse life of St. Peter, _Pǎ@trsdRǎ;pa.

3. The Woman of Weapon-Points

A Nadder is quick; Astrid's quicker. (She reached the secret valley first.)

A Gronkle is strong; Astrid's smarter. (She's prepared the perfect ambush.)

A Zippleback's teeth are sharp; Astrid's axe can't sever a hank of wool in the millrace yet, but she has hopes. (And a good whetstone.) Trickier than a Terror, bolder than a Nightmare: Astrid's every inch a Viking. (The whetstone screeches agreement.) So how did Hiccup â€" hopeless, careless, _useless_ Hiccup â€" beat her? She's held her peace long enough; when she waylays him today, she'll have some pointed questions to ask.

(And till then an axe to grind.)

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _Really cheating here: "the woman of weapon-points" is actually a kenning for Valkyrie from the _Vellekla _of Einarr skǎ;laglamm Helgason. But since a number of kennings for woman allude to named Valkyries (cf. "the faithful Hildr of the falcon-field" or "the HlÇ«kk of Kraki's snow-drift"), I thought I might as well turn the allusion around. Besides, if Astrid isn't a woman of weapon-points, who is? (Bonus allusion: Sigurd knew his sword Gram was sharp enough when it could split both an anvil and a hank of wool drifting in the current of a stream.)_

4. The Fir of Rings

The day Hiccup leaves his sickbed, a dour Stoick calls Astrid, Snotlout, Fishlegs and the twins out before everyone in the mead-hall. They approach the high seat warily (_"Told you: sixty percent chance of punishment anyway!"_ whispers Fishlegs), but the chief's gravity becomes a grin as he thanks them, springing a gilt armlet around each dragon-rider's wrist.

Astrid relishes the cheers until she notices Hiccup's arms are bare.

_What? No way! _Tugging her new ring off, she pushes through the crowd, but then she sees him smile as Stoick grips his shoulder.

Oh.

That clasp is reward enough, it seems.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _"The fir of rings," from the anonymous _Mǫrðuv-sur I_ (a poem about the Virgin Mary), is another kenning that compares a woman to a tree bedecked with jewelry or precious metals. (In this drabble, of course, Astrid's a little prickly about it.) Rings themselves are such a conventional reward-item in Norse culture that, as aforesaid, a common kenning for king is "ring-giver."
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5. The Best Hǫfn of the Serpents' Path

Beneath the cliffs the slate-gray waves roll sluggishly, but Astrid watches the gulls hovering in the ridge lift. "Okay, girl," she says, stroking Stormfly's neck. "Let's go!"

Stormfly promptly leaps skyward, mounting the raw sea breeze. As they glide along, Astrid rises in the saddle and kicks up onto her hands. Her heart pounds, but the dragon's back is steadier than a wind-tossed practice branch. She holds the armstand until she feels Stormfly's shoulders shift, wings angling for a downstroke, then drops back into her seat.

Her whoop of triumph, echoed by Stormfly's screech, scatters the gulls in raucous retreat.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _"The best Hǫfn of the path of serpents" comes from Kǫlfr Hallsson's _Kǫtrnadrpa_ again. "Hǫfn" is one of the nine names of the goddess Freyja (Snorri Sturluson's _Gylfagynning_ explains that she adopted a different name whenever she went searching for her husband Æðr); "path of serpents" is yet another kenning for gold. But Astrid is a dragon-rider, and a dragon's path is surely the sky ..._

6. The Gentle Necklace-Bearer

Chalk white, honey brown, ivory yellow: Phlegma's necklace of dragon's teeth fascinates Astrid. Each tine has its story (_"She dove at me, jaws wide, but I held my ground ..."_) and she knows them all by heart, the matrix of her heart's desire: _When I grow up, I want to be just like you._

"Go on," says Phlegma.

Reluctantly Astrid sets the necklace on the pyre beside Nadder skins and Gronkle heads and Nightmare horns, all laid out for their honorable burning. She glances back at her mother and gets a

thumbs-up. "Something to tell your daughters!" Phlegma calls.

Astrid nods.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _"The gentle necklace-bearer" is from the anonymous _PlÃ¡citusdrÃ¡pa, _a verse life of St. Eustace._

7. The Faithful Hildr of the Falcon-Field

Flying in skein proves trickier than it looks: two geese don't have the different wingspans and stall speeds of a Nightmare and a Gronkle. So Toothless and Stormfly take point more often than Hookfang or Meatlug and nobody lets Barf and Belch lead after the forking pass incident.

And Astrid always forms up on Hiccup's right.

He needs a reliable wingmate to cover his blind spot; it's bigger than most people's because his attention is caught by things they ignore. So she keeps one eye out for trouble and one on his back.

("Great excuse!" applauds Ruffnut. Astrid clouts her.)

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _"The faithful Hildr of the falcon-field" is from one of the _lausavÃ-sur_ attributed to Harald Hardrada, the Norwegian king who famously invaded England in 1066 to be defeated at Stamford Bridge. "Hildr" is the name of a Valkyrie; "falcon-field" is itself a kenning for arm. In his poem, Harald reports that the woman thus described advised him, "We do not creep into the hollow of the shield in battle because of the crash of weapons" â€" a sentiment with which Astrid would surely agree._**

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8. The Height of the Harbor-Light

"Night fury!" bellows the lookout.

Astrid runs to the landing ground, waving. She gets a wing-waggle in return before Toothless stoops like a Nadder to touch down right at her feet. Laughing, she hugs Hiccup and scratches Toothless's chin; the dragon whuffs, licking her face, then galumphs uphill toward the basket of fish Ruffnut and Tuffnut have brought. Snotlout grabs his cousin's pack, fending off Fishlegs before he can extract Hiccup's field notes. (_"Gods, 'Legs, it's just parchment!"_)

Hiccup grins at Astrid the entire time. "Wow," he says. "It's good to be home. Miss us?"

"Nope," replies Astrid, grinning back.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _Cheating again: in "the height of the harbor-light," another kenning from Kǫ́lfr Hallsson's _Kǫ́trǫ́nadrǫ́pa, _"harbor-light" is one more kenning for gold. But I decided to read it as lighthouse (sorry, Kǫ́lfr!) and make Astrid the beacon by which Hiccup and Toothless guide themselves home._

9. The Hlç«kk of Kraki's Snow-Drift

Loki alone knows how the reivers got a foothold on Berk, but now that the dragon-riders have scouted their lair on Raven's Point, it's time to oust them. "Let's play wounded bird," Astrid suggests. "Stormfly and I will lure them out; you guys flank 'em."

Everyone nods except Hiccup. "Forget it!" he says.

"What?" exclaims Astrid. "It's a good plan!"

"It's a terrible plan." He wilts slightly under the stares of five Vikings and their dragons. "Okay, scratch that: it's a _crazy_ plan."

Astrid rolls her eyes. "And those _never_ work."

It works. And she never lets him forget it.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _"The Hlç«kk of Kraki's snow-drift," from a poem by the skald Grani about the aforementioned Harald Hardrada, is a doubly allusive kenning. Hlç«kk is the name of a Valkyrie; "Kraki's snow-drift" refers to an incident in the life of legendary Danish king Hrǫ́lfr Kraki. Once he escaped his enemies by sowing the snow behind him with gold which they broke off their pursuit to collect. Again, this drabble is less interested in the gold itself than in the cunning displayed by its use._

10. The Grǫ́mhildr of Strong Drink

Gothi's white liquor isn't as good as they hoped when they stole it. It tastes like medicine and takes everyone from sober to soused so fast they miss all the good parts. The twins snore in a heap, fingers up each others' noses; Fishlegs sits on Hiccup because friends don't let friends fly drunk. "This," Astrid announces, "was stupid."

Snotlout bristles; it was his idea. "Are you calling me stupid?"

"No," says Astrid, cracking her knuckles. "I'm calling you a goat-headed, sow-bellied, sheep-kissing son of a half-troll."

Stupid and no fun: Snotlout doesn't even get a scar out of it.

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><p>Author's Note: _"The troll-descended Grǫ́mhildr

of strong drink" is probably the most obscure of these kennings, as well as the least positive. From the *_Ynglingatal*, *_i__t* refers to a woman who sent a nightmare to kill Vanlandi, king of the Ynglings. (Snorri Sturluson's version of the story has it that Vanlandi earned this fate by abandoning his Finnish wife.) Magic not being a heavy influence in the *_How To Train Your Dragon_film-verse*, I decided to focus on the "strong drink" aspect of this kenning._

The actual title of this drabble is "The Troll-Descended GrÃ-mhildr of Strong Drink," but FFnet won't allow a chapter title that long. Boo, hiss.

11. The Lady of Leeks

Astrid stirs the pot of leek soup simmering over the fire. Without eggs or cream, it's thin, pungent stuff. *_Blech._* Hiccup had some before Gothi sniffed his belly wound, but he'll need more after she sews him up.

Suddenly the sickroom door opens and Stoick drags a snarling Toothless over the threshold. "That's three," he says grimly. "Stay with Astrid."

"Uh," Astrid replies to the closing panel. Toothless's claws score the wood in vain; his eyes plead with her. "Sorry," she says. "They w-won't let me in, either."

She wipes her nose as Toothless settles beside her. Stupid smelly leeks.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: *_*"The lady of leeks" is from a *_lausavÃ-sa* *_by VÃ-gfÃ°ss VÃ-ga-GlÃ°msson. Snorri Sturluson, in* *Ã"lafs saga Helga*, *__tells the story of a woman who diagnoses the seriousness of warriors' stomach wounds by feeding them leek soup; if she could then smell the leeks in the wound, it was a bad sign._*

12. The SkÃ¶gul of Costly Things

Astrid immediately regrets giving Hiccup his Snoggletog present, a bronze cloak-pin set with amber, in public. "Whoa, shiny!" shouts Tuffnut, staggering into his sister. While Ruffnut jams his helmet over his eyes, Snotlout thumbs the insect trapped in the gem. "Hey, Hiccup," he asks, "is that you in there?"

"Better run now!" Ruffnut advises.

"Looks like an old lady," says Fishlegs, nose practically bumping Hiccup's collarbone, and Snotlout guffaws. Astrid's knuckles whiten as her cheeks redden: should she kill her so-called friends or herself?

Hiccup shrugs everyone off. "Thanks, Astrid," he says frankly and kisses her.

She resolves to live.

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><p>Author's Note: _"The Skǫgul of costly things" is from the anonymous Brǫðkaupsvǫsur, _a poem recording miracles of the Virgin Mary. Skǫgul is a Valkyrie; in the Hǫkonarmál _of Eyvindr Finnsson Skǫldaspilli, court poet of Haakon the Good of Norway, Skǫgul is sent by Odin to oversee Haakon's last battle and choose which of his men will join Odin's following in Valhalla. Among those she deems worthy is Haakon himself â€" an interesting fate, since he was Christian. Evidently that was no bar in Eyvindr's eyes. And to clarify Fishlegs's _faux pas:_ an "old lady" is a species of moth found in northern Europe._

13. The Ale-Willow

Somehow it falls to Astrid to bear the guest-cup at feasts. Shiploads of visitors come to Berk now that it's the world center of dragon-training and Stoick insists on a proper Viking welcome. All Astrid has to do is not trip over her skirts, _always_ serve the chief first, and dodge anyone who gets handsy rather than knock them senseless. One southerner does lose a tooth, but that's what comes of suddenly leering down at a girl's chest when she's raising a gold-bound horn to your lips. Oops.

Mostly, though, everyone behaves. The laws of hospitality have their own teeth.

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><p>Author's Note: _"The ale-willow" is from Bjarni byskup Kolbeinsson's Jǫmsvǫkingadrǫpa. _Brewing ale was women's work in Viking times; serving it to guests likewise, from the number of scenes in literature in which they do so._

14. The Lime-Tree of the Kerchief

Astrid tucks her hair under the coif, white samite shot with gold, that Hiccup gave her at dawn before leaving to find and mollify Toothless. The dragon sulked off into the woods after Stoick and Phlegma tossed him out with the other bridal guests, but no wedding night needs a witness. Enough of those crammed the mead-hall for the hand-fasting to make Astrid's palms sweat and Hiccup stutter through his oath.

Berk's wives wear helmets more often than hoods; Astrid expects she'll do so, too. But first she'll test her husband's clever fingers against the ribbons knotted beneath her chin.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _"The lime-tree of the kerchief" is from one of Ær's lausavǫsur. _Married women in the Viking era tended to cover their hair while the unmarried didn't, wearing it loose or held back with a fillet. The evidence for kerchiefs as head-gear appears to be a matter of dispute; coifs, on the other hand, have been found as grave goods in several locations. Since I wanted to use the idea of covering the head as a sign of marriage, I

decided to have Hiccup give Astrid a coif instead of a kerchief. (He probably should have given her a helmet, since that's the only head-gear anyone wears in the film, but I guess he was trying to be creative.)_

15. The Linen-Oak

When Hild stops jiggling from foot to foot beside her, Astrid frowns. The girl is almost never still: even asleep she twitches and kicks like a dreaming hound. But as the keepers lead the unbonded dragons into the arena, Hild stands quietly, her freckled face as pale as her new kirtle. Astrid puts an arm around her shoulders. "Ready?" she asks.

Hild takes a deep breath, then pokes her chin out. "Born ready!"

They step forward together; nostrils flared, the dragons observe them curiously. "That's her," Hild whispers, pointing.

Grasping her daughter's hand, Astrid guides it to the Nadder's snout.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: _"The linen-oak" is another kenning from a _lausavÃ-sa _of Harald Hardrada, this one evidently composed while he was out raiding in 1048. It's the traditional steadfastness of oak that drew me to this image for a mature Astrid._

_My thanks to the Skaldic Project Academic Body, without whose website _Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages _this sequence would have been much more difficult to compose._

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file.